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Potter Christ

In the early part of the nineteenth century a great wave of religious fervor and zeal for reform swept over the United States. New creeds arose. In every locality people were embracing religious movements in an hysterical attempt to attain the Kingdom of Heaven in haste.

A striking revelation of the prevalent religious excitement of this period is afforded by the rise of Mormonism, which throve as did none of the other doctrines. Perhaps the most important reasons for this were the shrewd economic policy of the leaders and the fact that Brigham Young set up his New Zion in far-off Utah, from which the back-slider or faint-hearted could scarcely escape.

As one religious movement gained in strength another cult would sometimes arise within that movement. Individuals demanded the right to give their own interpretation of divine revelations. The history of Mormonism is full of such dissension. Sometimes the break occurred over a difference of belief in dogma, as at Nauvoo when a faction revolted against polygamy. Sometimes a prophet arose within the ranks who advocated entirely new principles. An instance of the latter

may be seen in the teaching and preaching of Potter Christ, an obscure man in Council Bluffs, self-styled "Messenger of the New Covenant".

Scanty information gives Kentucky as the birth-place of this Mormon dissenter. He seems to have come to Council Bluffs in 1863, his wife and children, it is said, being in Salt Lake. The first information concerning him is given in a Council Bluffs newspaper. The reporter, who attended a "Mormon Meetin'" in May, 1864, found that the "regular services of the day were ended" when he arrived, "but one of the Elders in Israel soon after announced that the congregation were requested to stay and hear the word of God as understood by Potter Christ". By crowding closer to the pulpit he saw "an elderly man, clothed in a butternut rig, and having on his forehead what he termed 'the mark' — it looked to us like Indian ink — and it read, 'Potter Christ, the Living God, the Morning Star.' " In a two-hour sermon, during which, according to the reporter, he was listened to with close attention, he announced his immortality, and the fact that he was the father of Christ, Joseph Smith, "or any other man". He even considered things mundane, predicting that the Civil War would end in the establishment of three distinct confederacies — the East, Northwest, and South. The East, comprising New England and the four

adjoining States, was to be presided over by Brigham Young; Potter himself would have control of Zion or the Northwest; and the South was to continue under the rule of Jefferson Davis.

The next notice of Potter Christ in the newspapers did not occur until the latter part of 1868. Where he was during the interval, there is no way of knowing, but it may be surmised that he was on religious missions of some kind, and that his own opinions were crystallizing. By this time he seems definitely to have broken away from Mormon teachings, and had included the Democrats among those who would find salvation. His ideas were expressed in a poem of twenty verses, entitled "A hymn to be sung by the Democrats on the return of Potter Christ from the Celestial World after the Democracy have obtained the decisive victory." While the Council Bluffs *Democrat* spoke in a derisive tone concerning the man, and termed his hymn doggerel, it nevertheless approved of his political convictions, and accorded him full space.

Again, so far as the newspapers were concerned, Potter Christ relapsed into obscurity, and nothing further is known of his activities until two years later when a dispassionate announcement appeared: "Potter Christ — This personage well known in the Missouri Valley, has now in press, and will soon have ready for publication, a pam-

phlet, entitled 'The Revelations of Potter Christ, Messenger of the New Covenant'. In this pamphlet Potter Christ makes some strange and startling revelations, which, if they be true, and matters should result as he predicts, will produce a great change in the religious atmosphere."

A few days later, the first edition of the "Revelations of Potter Christ" was ready for delivery. In an advertisement he offered to the world the work of "the greatest writing medium of the Age, written in the presence of Celestial Angels, relative to the end of the world and the general judgment, with portrait of the author. Sent free to all on receipt of price 25 cents single copy — six copies for one dollar."

In April, 1871, Potter Christ, "Son of the Living God", explained certain symbols alleged to have been seen in the sky. The cross, he said, signified the short but bloody war immediately to commence, in which "the elect will be hard pushed but will eventually gain the crowning victory through the assistance of Potter Christ, Ancient of Days." The letter "E", he continued, had a two-fold meaning. "First 'E' stands for the elect; second, the 'E' means the end of the gospel dispensation, to close this year, 1871, and is succeeded by the dispensation of the Celestial Law now ushered in by Potter Christ. Amen." People wondered

whether the man was a blaspheming monomaniac or a harmless mystic.

At this juncture a sinister figure appeared on the scene — a prophet who proclaimed the second coming of Christ on June 15, 1871. This person was Paul Pelkey, of Andrew County, Missouri. According to him, Christ was to make his appearance about one mile from Fillmore, Missouri, and could be known by the one and one-half inch red ribbon which he would wear in his hat.

The newspapers immediately sought out Potter Christ for an interview, and three days later his statements concerning false Christs were printed: "I hereby rebut and declare the declaration made by Paul Pelkey, in the Savannah, Missouri, *New Era*, to be false respecting the second coming of Christ. The person once called Jesus Christ will not come to this earth this year, 1871. He will not come until I, Potter, his only Son, prepare the way for his second coming which will not take place until the latter part of 1872. He then comes, not as Jesus Christ, but the Eternal God, Abraham, the great Spiritual Father of us all." If a man should appear wearing a red sign, "it would not be Jesus, for he has the pure Democratic sign, which is always white."

Matters, however, did not rest with Potter's statement. The new leader evidently had the

old man worried, for the next day after he had made his declarations, the *Evening Times* announced his departure for Missouri to confer with Paul Pelkey. He did not go, the paper facetiously asserted, to see Paul for the purpose of threatening him, but "to reason with him, and if possible to have him succumb to his authority." Potter did not want war but, "if necessary to establish his authority as the Son of the Living God", he would accept battle. "He says the war will not last over six months before the 'elect are triumphant'. We rest secure," the article concluded virtuously, "as Potter assured us that we are on the side of the elect."

Nothing further was heard from the Council Bluffs newspapers concerning the outcome of the conference. It may be conjectured that time itself proved Potter right in regard to Paul Pelkey's prophecy. On one occasion, relative to Potter Christ, there appeared an announcement that "this white-haired candidate for the state retreat three miles from town" had brought to be printed what purported to be a special message from heaven written in Chaldaic and Sanscrit, according to Potter, but in hen scratches, according to the newspaper. "The translation", the editor commented, "proves that Father Abraham is not a first-class grammarian."

In another issue an item written in a sarcastic vein concerned a prophecy which Potter had made relative to an immediate conflagration in which "our beautiful world" would be burnt to ashes. As a supplementary prediction, the editor suggested, "It is money to buttons that this conflagration comes off on the Fourth of July, when our firemen and engines, and half the firemen in the Northwest will be celebrating the Independence in Bock's Garden."

Perhaps the hot summer months caused a scarcity of news matter, perhaps the newspapers themselves began to see Potter Christ as an interesting figure, for in July, 1871, a long signed article appeared in which the old prophet announced his new bible, *The Midnight Cry*, as his latest revelation. "The 'Midnight Cry' is coming! The mysterious book so long under the seven seals is now immediately to be put in print." Then came the information that a steam power press was en route from Keokuk to print this "long-expected" book, which its author modestly called the eighth wonder of the world.

A resumé of its contents gives an inkling of the nature of the book. Part one contained the opening and closing of the six gospel dispensations "from the beginning of the world down to the present, A. D. 1871." There was also, the article

said, a full description of how and when the sun was formed; who God is, and his first name; his wife; the formation of the first female; a full description of the New Jerusalem; who Jesus was and who he is now; the salvation of all females; and sundry other things including sixty new millenium hymns, Potter Christ's holy lineage through twenty-two bodies, and the unholy lineage of Brigham Young from Cain.

Part two, Potter explained, showed the final downfall and utter destruction of modern Babylon and a full description of the two great battles to be fought between Potter Christ, "the living God", and Brigham Young, at the head of their great armies, in which Potter was to slay all of Brigham's vast army except two thousand, and capture his military chest containing ninety-five millions in gold. There followed also much other information. The long list of revelations which Potter gave in his "brief prospectus" showed at least a most remarkable imagination.

The final paragraph dealt with the physical appearance of the *Midnight Cry*, including "a steel plate engraving of the Angel Gabriel, with Potter Christ and family of seven persons, entering the chariot of the angel in the presence of twenty-seven witnesses". The book was not to be sold, but was to be sent free to the poor. It was sug-

gested, however, that the rich might donate free gifts to Potter's angel witnesses, as "an untold amount of means" would be needed to print the millions of books necessary for every tenth person in Christendom to have one.

The newspapers of Council Bluffs never announced the appearance of the *Midnight Cry*. Did it remain unpublished through lack of funds, or did a more immediate exigency demand its author's attention? At any rate Potter Christ continued to fill newspaper space for a while. Moreover, he was becoming militant in his zeal, and waxing strong in his faith.

Two days after the announcement of his *Midnight Cry* the old man "arrayed in his ascension robe of white linen trimmed with gold tinsel, with a tinselled crown on his head, and moccasins on his feet" was seen marching "with a large crowd of faithful and unfaithful followers." Asked if he were "going up" that day, Potter answered, "Yes, I'm going up the street."

On July 24, 1871, appeared a notice that Potter Christ and his angels would march in ascension regalia through the city, accompanied by a band of music, in obedience to a new order signed by "Gabriel". One of the business firms took advantage of the publicity that Potter was having heaped upon him, and incorporated him in their

advertisements. The public was advised that Potter Christ and the Angel Gabriel proposed opening a branch house on Mars for the company!

Throughout the summer of 1871, Potter Christ and his followers continued to parade in their apostolic regalia. Inhabitants of the town must undoubtedly have regarded them with conflicting emotions. On the first of August he announced in a paid notice that Council Bluffs was doomed to destruction by tornado and flood. The people of the town had failed to heed his warnings, had in fact abused him "by setting and hissing on boys to hoot and yell so as to drown the words of my proclamation." Indeed, they had gone so far as to try to make the mule on which he rode throw him off. Nevertheless he would give them another chance if they but complied with his conditions on or before the fifteenth of August. And then in a reassuring postscript he added, "when the vials of wrath is poured out, my 30 witnesses shall be all saved with their families."

According to the newspapers, every subsequent wind and rain storm during the fall set Potter's believers to packing their valises. By this time his fame had spread in western Iowa, if no farther. The *Osceola Democrat* poked fun at both Council Bluffs and its prophet, but in a more serious vein the *Sioux City Journal* is quoted as saying: "Pot-

ter Christ, of Council Bluffs, says a good many things of interest mixed up with idiotic ravings, and the same Potter assumes to be a leader in some peculiar sort of Christianity".

Nothing which had been so emphatically predicted by Potter had occurred: there had been no world-wide conflagration; Council Bluffs had not been wiped out; apparently the "long expected" *Midnight Cry* had not materialized. Instead of being taken to heaven in their ascension robes, the new Christ and his followers remained solidly on earth. No wonder that a new leader, however inferior, appeared to challenge the old one.

In the fall of that year, a "fellow named Van Doosen", claiming to be sent direct from Heaven to supplant Potter, succeeded in winning the weary, disillusioned followers to his "New Dispensation". Even the "Crib", headquarters of Potter and his disciples, was seized by the usurper. Van Doosen even went so far as to lay violent hands on the old prophet, but his erstwhile followers interfered, and the old man's life was spared yet awhile. But it was the beginning of the end for Potter Christ.

The winter records some of the activities of Van Doosen, by then Van Deusen. Although he had successfully supplanted the former leader, he showed no especial "divine guidance" in the evan-

gelization of the world. He demanded more money from the faithful, and became unpopular.

Against the false prophet, whom he knew to be a medium of the devil, Potter Christ waged a weak but relentless war. During an absence of Van Deusen, he tried to marshal his disciples again for the purpose of reorganization, but with what success can not be learned. Indicative of his fast-failing health and strength the *Times* remarked that "Potter Christ looks as if he was 'going up' fast". A month later he was having his ascension robes prepared. The paper stated that he was sick, "nigh unto death". Since Van Deusen had taken his place, Potter, "heart-broken, sick, abandoned, neglected, has been dying by inches. The expectation is that he will migrate to the great unknown pretty soon and make his eleventh coming about the year A. D. 2562."

On April 3, 1872, the year revealed by him as the time when the Eternal God would come on earth again, appeared the last entry. It was entitled simply, "The Midnight Cry of Potter Christ". There was no longer any expression of contempt. The article, although florid in the style of the times, had dignity, and there was a sincere regret for the old man:

"Last night expired Potter Christ, and his soul departed to that summerland, which has so exten-

sively been a topic for his mind during a series of years. Potter was a medium for religious spirits of a Mormon-philosophical class. He was honest in his views, however eccentrically he presented them, and a great part of symbolic spiritual teaching he accepted without further investigation, as real facts of life. He was a man in his ultra-Mormon philosophy, but a child in spiritualism."

Sixty years after his death, Potter Christ remains unknown. Only the fragmentary record of his life in the pages of the old Council Bluffs newspapers remains. Few old people in the town are left who remember him. One old lady, in whose home Potter lived when she was a child, recalls him with an effort: "Yes, he was a good man, a sincere man. And he was like a mother to us children, for we had no mother. We used to be ashamed that father wore the mark on his forehead, but Potter was good to us."

Though the glimpses of the old man in the newspapers are fleeting, his figure is distinct. Ludicrous, yes; absurd, undoubtedly; but withal he seemed sincere, and his faith never wavered. He was a product of the nineteenth century, an era that saw the rise and fall of many a minor prophet.

HELEN BRYANT WYMAN